

Teamwork increases student learning and career success

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Students use notes, books and each other to improve learning in the classroom.
Credit: Elsa Sanchez

A two-year study of college students at The Pennsylvania State University (PSU) proves that students learn better and develop higher-level skills by participating in cooperative (team) activities, compared to traditional classroom teaching methods.

Elsa Sánchez and Richard Craig, professors in the Department of Horticulture at PSU, surveyed students enrolled from 2003-2005 in their Plant Systematics course. The specialized course was designed around a cooperative learning model that required students to work in teams on a variety of activities. For example, students organized a learning fair for

elementary school students, participated in hands-on laboratories and worked in randomly assigned teams for their final exam.

"We were interested in learning students' perceptions and sharing our experiences. We found that students liked the cooperative activities and learned from other team members. As instructors, we found that students participated more in the lecture part of the course as team activities were completed.", Sánchez stated.

The study has additional implications for how teachers prepare for and deliver classroom instruction. Sánchez noted "it took more organization and planning to use cooperative activities compared to the traditional lecture method", and added that lectures are far less conducive to facilitating higher levels of thinking than cooperative learning strategies. Student outcomes of class participation showed an increase in several indicators of higher-level thinking, such as application of concepts and analysis and synthesis of information.

"While traditional lectures transfer knowledge, lectures are far less conducive to facilitating higher levels of thinking, such as application of concepts and analysis and synthesis of information." - Dr. Elsa Sánchez

Using cooperative activities also allows students to practice skills that will enhance their future careers, including communication, conflict resolution, creativity and time management. Sánchez sees benefits of using collaborative processes that extend beyond the college classroom, noting that "students benefit from practicing real-world skills that they will need after graduation, and the industry will benefit from future employees who possess skills that promote success."

Source: American Society for Horticultural Science

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